Outline of the topic

Much of the recent literature on political communication has focused on the adaptation by politicians to the mediatised public sphere and in particular their growing professionalism in image projection (photo-opportunities, sound bites) and news management (agenda shaping, spin doctoring). The growing importance of media advisers as central actors in the process of political communication has also attracted considerable attention on the part of political scientists. Recent ECPR workshops on aspects of political communication (Oslo 1996 and Warwick 1998) largely focused on these two sets of actors and the inter-relationship between them. Yet somewhat surprisingly in the light of their central mediating role as producers of information, political journalists have tended to receive less attention in the relevant political science literature of the past few years and no recent ECPR workshop has examined their role, functions, status and output.

The aim of this proposed workshop ("Political journalism: new challenges, new practices") is to address this imbalance by focusing attention on journalists, especially political journalists, as key strategic actors linking politicians with public opinion in the political communications process. Operating within media environments which have changed enormously over the past decade (including growing competition for audiences and revenue, the development of new information technology, the advent of rolling news schedules, the rising professionalisation of information sources and a greater emphasis on media organisations as global players), what is the current status of political journalism and its practitioners? How do journalists adapt their practices to make politics interesting and relevant to audiences often disillusioned by political elite behaviour and the complexities of the contemporary political agenda? What sort of new relationships have been created between journalists and their political elite sources?

In short, the workshop aims to concentrate on a particular set of political communication actors who have been comparatively under-researched by political scientists in recent years.

Type of paper solicited

The main questions addressed by this workshop will be:

1. The changing profession of political journalism within the media

Political journalism has long been a strongly specialised professional role (eg the Westminster Lobby correspondents in the UK). Is this specialisation threatened by the changing weight of commercial imperatives or by new hierarchies and division of work in the 'journalistic field'? In general terms, how has the profession of political journalism adapted to new media environments and practices of political communication?
For example, it would be useful on the basis of national and comparative studies to map the changes in the power and status of political journalists. How do political journalists perceive and evaluate their role in media organisations? How has that role changed? For example, how have print journalists responded to the central importance gained by television as the primary political forum? Are print journalists condemned to comment after the event on a political spectacle organised for the electronic media? Is it possible to consider that political journalism in the print media is increasingly a written translation of what happens on television screens? Or have print journalists preserved or even re-invented their own ways of covering politics?

Another possible area of inquiry concerns the reconciliation of political commitment by journalists with professional norms of impartiality. In many countries the history of political journalism can be viewed as a struggle to construct a professional coverage of politics, free from party commitments on the part of media owners, from state control or from formal linkages with political parties. How do political journalists currently secure ‘journalistic freedom’ (eg from interventionist proprietors) and with what success? What balance-sheet can be drawn up of experiments such as the American ‘Civic’ or ‘Public Journalism’ and its equivalents in other countries?

Structural changes among the actors of political journalism might also be linked to the growing importance of specialised correspondents in non-political news-sections (eg health, the environment). Using the combined resources of specialised/technical knowledge and the techniques of investigative reporting, these journalists are often able to discover or create ‘affairs’ or ‘scandals’ concerning politicians (eg the contaminated blood affair in France). National case-studies would bring to the fore the importance of these changes, allowing for an understanding of the complex relationship between competitors/colleagues of the same media organisation or outlet in managing the coverage of such stories when they become ‘politicised’.

One might also inquire about the future contribution of political journalists based on some current trends. Is there a new type of political journalism developing without journalistic input? The search for audience ratings and the desire to combine politics and entertainment have led to new programme formats and scenarios where politicians are interviewed in talk-shows and generally integrated in programmes which are not specifically dedicated to politics (eg, The Larry King Show, Phil Donahue and Gerlado in the USA, Delarue and Gildas in France, Michael Aspeli, Terry Wogan and Richard and Judy in the UK). One of the consequences of this trend is media exposure for politicians without political journalists acting as intermediary with the audience. Instead this task is filled by hosts, comperes, ‘animateurs’ or non-specialist journalists. How do specialised political journalists react to this take-over of political coverage by non-specialists? Will developments in new media technology such as the Internet further reduce the status of political journalists as intermediaries between politicians and public opinion?

Participants are invited to pay attention in their analysis to the morphological changes in the global population of journalists, as some significant trends seem quite common to many European countries. These include the increasing role of young and female journalists, the growing proportion of graduate entrants into the profession and the casualisation of employment conditions.
2. The inter-relationship between political journalists, politicians and public opinion: managing the interdependencies

What proactive strategies do political journalists employ in the face of news management attempts by politicians and their advisers? Political journalists are certainly not passive victims who are easily manipulated. One resource they possess is investigative political reporting. In some countries there is evidence of political journalists taking greater initiative in framing critical political coverage than previously. At the same time, in a kind of symbolic media 'arms race', journalists may reply to the heavy weaponry of spin doctors with a new style of reporting which gives considerable space to a critical analysis of politicians' media-strategies. Such an approach may be designed to inform audiences about the 'packaging of politics', to reveal the tricks of the spin doctors' art and to seek to empower the audience to probe behind the packaged political message. How do journalists see the role and evaluate the impact of this 'reflexive' political reporting?

Another aspect of the changing inter-relationship is the question of how media organisations manage and structure the ambiguous relationship between their journalists and politicians? The basic challenge here is the need for the media organisation to have specialist journalists who have an in-depth knowledge of an institution, party or leading politician while at the same time avoid the risk that the journalist will identify too closely with the political protagonist and become involved in a relationship of mutual appreciation. Practices such as journalistic turn-over, whereby the party or politician covered by a journalist changes on a regular basis, and (in)formal regulations prohibiting hidden gifts from politicians to journalists, have developed in different media systems.

We are also interested in the impact of commercial imperatives on political journalists and their output. How do journalists cope with the necessity of making political reporting attractive for large audiences? How do they attempt to combine the high normative democratic ideal of a serious and stimulating public debate with the need to attract audiences? Is this commercial pressure the same across different media (eg print and audiovisual; public service and commercial)?

3. New ways of framing political coverage and new forms of political journalism

Changes in political journalism may result in new 'framings' of issues on the political agenda and new forms of political journalism. Three of these seem to merit attention, though the following list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive:

- the private/psychological frame?
  One trend in political journalism has been the rising importance of the 'private' framing of public actors, whereby the behaviour of politicians is explained through an analysis of their character and psychological make-up. Can this investigation of the 'private' dimension shed a new light on political life and provide a better understanding of politicians' behaviour? Or does it lead to what Richard Sennet called 'The fall of public man'? Are these changes of framing linked to changes in the gender-balance among political journalists?

- decline of traditional political reporting (eg parliamentary coverage) and blurring of the edges of political coverage?
Are traditional forms of political coverage centring on established political institutions (e.g. Parliament) losing out to a new form of coverage which integrates politics with more general social issues (e.g. the environment, crime)?

- towards an 'intimate/ethnographic reporting' of politics?
  Beyond the 'psychological' approach to political coverage, new ways of reporting politics seem to have developed in some national media. The shift here may be described as a switch from 'top-down' to 'bottom-up', with an approach to political coverage which no longer focuses so much on the heroic choices of rulers, on the pro and cons of policy decisions or on parliamentary debate, but rather on the impact of politics on 'ordinary people'. This approach to political reporting investigates how 'laypersons' feel and consider the political world, their attitudes to politicians and their interpretation of the 'political game'.

- a European framework?
  While more and more policies and choices are conditioned by regulations and decision-processes located in Brussels or in international forums, the organisation of news-desks in media organisations remains mainly 'national'. How is political journalism adapting (or not) to the growing supranational and international dimensions of governance and the policy-process? Can one identify the emergence of a 'European' political journalism inside national media and/or through the role of transnational media organisations/outlets?

Participants

The directors hope to mobilise the core of active participants in the ECPR standing group on Media and Politics. However, we strongly wish to enlarge the range of paper givers to include younger members of the profession (e.g. research students) and academics from countries and areas which are usually under-represented in political communication fora (especially from eastern and southern Europe). This workshop will also be enriched by the participation of scholars from research fields adjacent to political science, especially from communication studies.

We should like to emphasise that without being overly dirigist, the framework of this 'call for papers' must be taken seriously so as to guarantee a minimal coherence for the workshop discussions. Proposals, therefore, are requested to mention clearly which questions (1, 2, 3) they intend to focus on and the methodology/sources of their research. We also suggest that papers should try to develop some theoretical conclusions, highlighting for instance the balance between national particularities and what may appear as global trends so as to provide material for a global synthesis. It is hoped that the workshop will result in the publication of an edited volume.

The workshop is co-directed by Raymond Kuhn, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, UK and Erik Neveu, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Rennes, France. Proposals for papers must be sent to both co-directors.